



Contribution ID: 9

Type: **not specified**

“We must opt for survival. No substitute for negotiation.” Some reflections on the civil commitment of nuclear physicists during the Cold War: the Italian case

Tuesday 27 September 2022 09:00 (35 minutes)

My talk will focus on the peace activism of the Italian scientists during the Cold War.

With the beginning of the nuclear age, several scientists claimed a specific role in raising awareness of the perils of their times, both in their countries and at a transnational level. After brief reflections on some prominent international efforts in this field (as Pugwash, established as consequence of the Russell Einstein Manifesto), the aim of my speech is to depict the “social activation” of the Italian community of physicists in the arms control and disarmament field.

In Italy, a community of physicists around these topics emerged during the Non-Proliferation Treaty’s debate (mid 1960s). Afterwards, we can observe another significant period of commitment to arms control during the crisis of détente (end of 1970s/early 1980s). Connected with associations and groups based in other countries, these Italian scientists pursued the purposes of 1) educating citizens about nuclear weapons; 2) pushing their government for progress in arms control and détente; 3) strengthening a transnational network of likeminded activists.

Being an historian of international relations, I will describe the key projects promoted by the Italian scientists (such as ISODARCO, USPID, the activities based at the Accademia dei Lincei), highlighting the main tensions and thorniest issues of each specific historical phase. Although some publications are available, scientists’ advocacy of arms control and détente is not a theme that has been extensively investigated yet from a historical point of view.

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Session Classification: Physics and diplomacy: a chain reaction

Track Classification: sisfa 2022